

Emissary of the Void, Part VI

By Greg Keyes; Illustration by Dave Dorman

"I always figured I would see what killed me," Leafth said, scratching behind one ear with his right foot-hand.

"Well," Uldir said, absently, "you can see where it *isn't*."

Leafth snorted. "Human word games," he said. "We not only won't see anything, we won't feel anything. No way for a warrior to go. My mother always said I would come to a bad end, hanging around with humans."

"Well, nobody twisted your leg. Anyway, you were already destined for a bad end, no matter what company you kept." Uldir shrugged. "If it's any consolation, nobody knows exactly what you feel when you cross the singularity of a black hole. It might be extremely painful when every atom in your body collapses into neutrons. And since time virtually stops, it could last a really long time."

"You're trying to cheer me up."

"No, what I'm doing is trying to think of a way to keep it from happening at all, Leafth. There are over two hundred people on this ship. Maybe you should stop worrying about whether this is a worthy death for you and start--"

He turned at a sound behind him, raising his blaster. After all, they were on an enemy vessel. He thought they had accounted for all of the crew, but with the Yuuzhan Vong you never knew. The ship, like all of their tools, was a living organism. It probably had weird pockets and chambers everywhere that they hadn't noticed.

But the woman shrugging through the shredded biolock of the slave transport's bridge was not Yuuzhan Vong; she was a short Corellian with platinum hair, a diamond-cutting gaze, and a blaster rifle.

"Hi, Vega," Uldir said. "Good work down there."

"Good work yourself. Explain to me again how we're falling into a black hole?"

"The pilot aimed us at it, then attacked Leafth. Leafth had to kill him." He gestured at one of the three scarred and mutilated bodies on the floor. The scars and mutilations were old ones -- the Yuuzhan Vong cut themselves up as a sign of rank. What had killed the pilot were the three blaster bolts the Dug had put in him.

"So un-aim it," Vega recommended. "Change course."

Someone else was coming through the ruined portal behind Vega -- a young woman with dark hair with bangs. Half-supported on her shoulder was a tall human male with a shock of red hair and emerald eyes. Uldir knew the woman -- she was a Jedi, Klin-Fa Gi, and she was directly responsible for the mission that had led them to their present situation. He didn't know the man, but from the way he and Klin-Fa were so chummy, he figured it was the Jedi they had come here to rescue.

"The pilot destroyed the cognition hood, too," he explained, trying to ignore the sudden sinking feeling in his belly.

Vega's brow folded. "There aren't any manual controls?"

"None that I know of. If you see any, be sure and let me know, though." He turned to the Jedi. "Klin-Fa, you've had a little more experience with Vong ships. What do you think?"

"The Yuuzhan Vong aren't much for back-up systems," she said. "Probably think it's cowardly thinking, or some such idiocy," Vega snorted. "How about we get a tow? Vook's still out there with the *No Luck Required*. He should have enough power to divert us from this suicide course."

"Yes, although with the gravity well that thing has, that window is rapidly closing. Unfortunately, it's not an option right now -- he's under attack."

"I thought he took care of all the coralskipper," Vega said.

Uldir shrugged. "Something else showed up. I'm not sure what, he didn't really have time to talk. But unless he beats them in the next ten minutes, we're on our own."

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Tsaa Qalu snarled with satisfaction as he put his ship into a roll and prodded the plasma nacelles to disgorge. Red gobbets leapt out toward the infidel ship, *No Luck Required*.

"This pilot is quite good," he said. "He knows our ways."

"He is an infidel, sir," his subordinate reminded him.

"You deny his piloting skills, Laph Rapuung?" Tsaa Qalu grunted, as the dim was suddenly banded by viridian laser fire. That was no worry, the *Throat Slasher's* defensive voids should stop them all, but something didn't smell right.

A hunter lived by instinct. He yawed hard to upper port.

The cognition hood through which he flew the *Throat Slasher* made the ship seem as his own body, so when he changed direction violently he felt something akin to a twisted ankle. At the same time, he felt the surge of g-forces as the dovin basal taxed itself, unable to cancel all of the momentum from such an abrupt shift.

But it was a good move. Distracted by the laser barrage, he hadn't noticed the concussion missile falling in a long parabola from another quadrant. The infidel must have released it much earlier in the battle, instructing it in this delayed maneuver. Even with his sudden course change, the detonation was almost too close. The blow briefly stunned the *Slasher*, sending it off in a flat spin. Slices of enemy light followed him, nipping off cubic meters of yorik coral hull before he regained control.

"Well, Rapuung?" he sneered. "Only the instincts given me by the gods saved us from that. Still you question his skill?"

"It is his machine, sir, not him."

"Bah. Their machines are lifeless and vulgar. Do you truly suggest that a *machine* nearly killed us? You would prefer *that* explanation to the simple acceptance that some infidel pilots have superior skill?"

"That is heresy, sir."

"It is *not*," Tsaa Qalu roared. "It is truth. Truth is essential to a hunter, Rapuung. If you underestimate the prey because you lie to yourself, you will become prey yourself. The infidels are corrupt, yes, and most are weak. But some are worthy, as they have proven time and time again. It is utterly foolish to say otherwise."

"But the priests--"

"The *priests*," Tsaa Qalu spat the word out as if it were poison.

He had the *No Luck Required* beneath his talons again. He gnashed his teeth and fired. This time a red flare of evaporating metal told him he had pierced the enemy shields.

"He may be a good pilot," Laph Rapuung conceded. "But he cannot match you."

"Of course not. I am a hunter, chosen by the gods for the cloak of the *nuun*."

"And now you will destroy him."

"Soon."

The villip before him choose that moment to configure into the face of Viith Yalu, the Master Shaper on Wayland, the planet where this hunt had begun.

"Tsaa Qalu!" The Shaper demanded, as the villip tried to imitate the writhing tendrils of his headdress and thus convey the Master's agitation.

"Yes, Master Shaper."

"If you are not alone, send your subordinates away. I have something to discuss with you." There was something deeply grudging in his voice. "I am in the middle of battle."

"Break off immediately, in that case. I must speak to you *now*."

"Very well," Qalu said, trying to keep his own rancor from showing. He changed the vector to take him farther from the infidel, firing a few parting shots. The ship did not follow but instead moved back toward the doomed slave transport.

"Leave us, Laph Rapuung," he said.

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Uldir watched waxing nothingness with a growing sense of helplessness.

"Any ideas, people?" He asked. "Speak up."

"There is a possibility," the red-haired man croaked. They were the first words he had spoken.

"I'm sorry," Uldir said. "You are ... ?"

Knowing full well whom it must be, the way he and Klin-Fa were playing cozy.

"Bey Gandan. A Jedi, like Klin-Fa."

Right. "You know some way to fly this ship?"

"I think so." He said. He winced and closed his eyes for a moment.

"Well, don't keep us in suspense," Vega said.

"He's hurt," Klin-Fa snapped. "Can't you see that? Give him a minute."

Nope, Uldir thought, *I do not like this guy.* He looked frankly at Bey. "No offense, but I thought you were in a coma," he said.

"He was," Klin-Fa explained. "I snapped him out of it with the Force. Do you want to survive, Uldir?"

"Please," Bey said. "Don't argue. I may pass out again, and I have to tell you this while I'm still coherent."

"Let him talk, Boss," Vega said. "It can't hurt at this point."

"Go on," Uldir said, vaguely ashamed of his attitude. But this guy had been rubbing him the wrong way *before* they met, and now ...

"The coralskippers also have cognition hoods," Bey said. "They're linked, networked with the central control of this ship. If there's still a 'skip on board, you ought to be able to pilot the transport from there -- remotely, so to speak."

"That's stupid," Leaft snapped. "Any coralskipper pilot can take over the ship at any time?"

Bey shook his head. "No, not if someone is under the central hood. But if it's out of commission, then yes, I believe so."

"Urr." Leaft barred his teeth. "And how is it you know so much about piloting Vong ships?"

"I've been their captive for a while," Bey said, mildly. "And I'm still only guessing. But I think it's the best shot you've got."

"It's worth a try," Uldir had to admit.

"Where are the 'skipper bays?" Vega asked. "I'll do it."

"They should be along the outer hull access corridor," Klin-Fa said. "Go back to the axial corridor and take any major artery away from center."

"Fine," Vega replied. "Wish me luck." She turned to leave.

"No," Leaft growled. "I'll try it. And if it doesn't work. . ."

"If it doesn't work, you'll think uncharitable thoughts for a few seconds, at best," Klin-Fa said.

"Don't tempt me, Jedi," Leaft returned, glaring. Klin-Fa returned the angry stare dispassionately.

"Go, Leaft, if you're going," Uldir said. "And may the Force be with you."

Leaft rolled his eyes and without another word loped out of the chamber.

"Are you sure it's wise to entrust him with this?" Klin-Fa asked, once the Dug was out of earshot. Uldir studied the young Jedi. He noticed she was gripping Bey, almost as if she was afraid he might leave her again.

"You think you can fly better than Leaft?" He asked.

"No. But I think you can. And his anger--"

"The Yuuzhan Vong are pretty angry," Uldir said. "I don't think that will confuse this ship any."

"Six minutes, boss-boy," Vega said. "Then it doesn't matter who is flying the ship -- we'll be too deep in the gravity well to ever climb out."

Uldir nodded and returned his gaze to the transparency. Leaft had been right -- they couldn't see the black hole and never would. But as he'd said, you could see where it wasn't -- a corona of luminescent gas and iron particles surrounded it in a bluish nimbus. It looked like the pupil of a giant large enough to swallow a star system.

He noticed Vega had edged a little closer. "You think he can do it?" she whispered.

It sounded weird, coming from Vega. Vega never flinched. He had never imagined she even gave death a second thought. But then -- like Leaft -- she was used to facing down danger with a blaster. It was different to fall helplessly into nothingness. It was why he'd let Leaft be the one to make the attempt -- another few seconds without action and the Dug would have made his own.

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Leaft snarled and spat to himself as he ran through the living corridors of the Yuuzhan Vong ship. His anger beat in him like one of the old *Y'sd* drums of the thorp elders, like an ancient Gran-killing song. Like sonic boom after sonic boom.

The boss had gone mad; there was no doubt about that. As revolting as the human female was, she had still managed to drive him mad -- whether the cause was pheromones or the so-called Force, he did not know. And Vega, she was acting stupid too, like someone had taken her wilf-skimmer. If she wanted the boss, why didn't she just puff out her skin and take him? She was strong enough.

Not that Leaft ever, *ever* wanted to see a human female *or* male puff out their skin.

Of course, they didn't do that, did they? No inflating for them. No decent, straightforward announcement of a desire to mate. Instead, they drove each other crazy with words and then pulled idiotic stunts to impress one another. It was as if nature had turned on humans, favoring procreation of the foolish over selection of the fittest.

And, yes, maybe there was some sort of threat to the galaxy, or whatever. Did that justify this kind of behavior?

Even if he managed to pull them out of this -- like he had back at Wayland, when he'd thought to go out and hook up the fuel line to that old ship -- even if he did that, in under a standard hour they'd been deep in some *other* sarlacc pit, because every human on the ship was swept up in this *mating* frenzy.

He stopped, whipping around. Where were the stupid coralskippers? He thought he was in the right corridor. They were on the outside of the ship, but there had to be some way in to them from here, some docking mechanism.

He started pounding on the walls. How much time did he have left anyway?

Maybe it wasn't the boss who was stupid. Maybe he was. Maybe he should have gotten better instructions.

"Where are you?" He howled. He bounced farther down the corridor. Nothing.

In sheer frustration, he yanked out his blasters and started firing. Shreds of mycoluminescent bulkhead filled the air, along with a smell like burning meat and seaweed.

Panting, he sank onto his hands. They'd had it.

And then, quite silently, holes opened in the walls, each about a meter wide.

"Don't know what I'm about, eh?" Leafst snarled. "I'll show them." The holes were the mouths of tubes. Most didn't go very far and ended in opacity -- after all, the transport had launched most of its skips to fight the *No Luck Required*. But after a frantic footfall of seconds he found one that went back into a little grotto. He hastened down it and found something like a cross between the inside of a starfighter and the rotting carcass of a rancor. There was a seat, though, and he hopped in. The cognition hood dangled above him, and he grabbed it and pushed it down over his ears and head.

And it started talking to him. In Yuuzhan Vong.

He felt his ears flatten back. He wanted to yank the thing off, get those voices out of his head, but he had to do this, to prove -- Prove nothing. He was Leafst, a Dug, a warrior. He had nothing to prove. He just had to *do* this, save the boss, save Vega.

He remembered hearing it was a lot easier to fly one of these things if you knew the language, but it had been done before without that knowledge, and by a human. For him it should be no trouble at all. He closed his eyes.

"Fly, you stupid thing!" Nothing.

Frustrated, he stamped his foot.

G-forces smashed him back into the couch, and suddenly he saw stars -- and the transport, receding.

That was a start. The wrong start.

"No!" He yelled at the hood. "Not the 'skip, the *transport*!"

He fought down panic. The circle of nothingness was very near.

But then he understood. The 'skip wasn't obeying his thoughts -- it couldn't understand them. But it understood his body, his voluntary nerve impulses.

He closed his eyes again, flexed his manipulating digits, and the 'skip went into a spin. He grunted happily. He could control the 'skip. But how to take control of the transport?

"Well," he mused aloud, "If the skip is like my body, what's the transport to me?"

Another body? Right. And that voice. The one trying to talk to him -- that would be the coordinating device or whatever they called it.

He focused on the voice, and began talking to it, reaching for it, stretching ...

He touched something, but it slipped away. Biting back another yowl of frustration, he reached again

And got it. Suddenly his body seemed bigger, and he could feel himself pushing, pushing toward the black hole, because the last pilot had left the drive on.

So Leafst needed to push *away*.

So he did, and agony tore at him. The momentum was too great to simply check, even with the Yuuzhan Vong gravity drive. It would tear him -- the transport -- apart.

Of course, he was a pilot -- he ought to know he couldn't just reverse his way out of a black hole. So he had to *angle*, keep going toward the hole but angle, just keep above the event horizon, stay away from where space curved into a perfect circle.

He was panting. At this range, even a small course change was hard. But it was happening, it was happening, but fast enough? He wasn't sure.

The sick thing was, he was starting to enjoy flying the thing. Controls couldn't move a ship like this, couldn't make it respond the way your very muscles would. He felt like he was running down a funnel, already so fast that if he tried to stop he would fall over himself and plunge to where the deepening slope of the funnel became a sheer drop. He had to run so his momentum carried him along the wall of the funnel, not down it. That would be an orbit.

He managed it, his muscles screaming, but it wasn't enough to simply orbit. He had to get away, to go back up to the rim, and over it -- without all of his limbs tearing from their sockets.

Gravity clenched at him, and he heard the dovin basal's silent scream of protest as they slowed, slowed --

And sped up again.

Leaft howled with pain and joy. He howled at the dead star that could not beat him. He howled to live.

And because he had done it.

He relaxed, and his body felt small again. For a long moment he sat there, blinking and confused, because the black hole was still there, larger than ever. The transport wasn't there any more, though. Well, no, there it was, accelerating away...

"Oh, flupp," Leafth groaned.

His mother had been right, after all.

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"He did it!" Vega shouted. "We're out! We're clear!"

Uldir realized he was shouting, too, and that his fingers had gone to sleep they'd been clenched so tight. He slapped Vega on the back, and in a woozy instant realized it had somehow turned into a hug.

Vega realized it too, and she stepped back, her eyes avoided his. "Let's not get carried away, huh?"

"Yeah." He cast a glance at Klin-Fa and Bey. He was sitting down, now, in one of the chair-things, and Klin-Fa stood by herself, her face flushed, relieved -- and something else. Again, Uldir felt movement in the Force, something so big even his diminished senses could sense it.

Something *wrong*.

"What was that?" He asked, before he thought better of it.

"What was what?"

"Something in the Force."

"I didn't feel anything."

Uldir stared at her for a moment. "I guess I was wrong," he murmured. "Must just have been the relief."

"I thought the ship would pull apart for a while there," Bey said. "But I have to admit, your guy did it."

"He couldn't have managed it off without your help," Uldir said. "Thank you."

The Jedi smiled faintly. "I hoped it would work. I felt it would."

"Before this love fest goes to far, we ought to check on Vook," Vega reminded them.

"Oh, right," Uldir pulled out his comlink. "Vook, you there?"

"Here, captain," Vook promptly replied.

"How's your situation?"

"Not bad. The enemy craft retreated a few moments ago. We've taken only minor damage. I see you got the transport working."

"Yep. Leafth's flying it. Can you meet us?"

"Yes, sir, I have you on scope. Distance -- 555,892 kilometers."

"I'll have Leafth alter course to meet you."

"Very good, sir."

"Leaft, you copy that?"

But from the Dug's comlink, there was no signal whatever.

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"Boss, give it up," Vega said, her voice as soft as it ever got.

Uldir blinked his eyes at the stars. "It's only been a few hours. He could be anywhere."

"It looks like the coralskipper he was in launched. Boss -- Uldir --there's no way a 'skip had the power to escape the gravity well at that range."

Uldir felt his jaw lock. "I should have done it."

"That's stupid, and you know it. He got the job done. The same would have probably have happened with any of us, except that if you had done it, it would have left me in charge. That wouldn't be any good at all."

"You did fine when you were in charge back in the Wayland system."

"Maybe, but I hated it. I don't like command."

"Really?" Uldir said, feeling very cold. "Well, neither do I. I like flying. I like the job. But being responsible..." He gasped, fighting the tears back. "I am responsible, Vega. I have to be. I'm in charge. I brought us here."

"Leaft was responsible too. He knew that. We all know it. Come on, Boss. Is this really the first crewmember you've lost? The first friend?"

"No. No. Not by a long shot. I even had to kill one once -- at least I thought he was my friend. But that was his choice. Leaft died because of my choices." He swung on her. "And they've all been wrong, haven't they? Every decision I've made since meeting Klin-Fa Gi has been wrong."

"No."

"What? You've disagreed with me every step of the way."

"Yeah. But you were right, I was wrong. You've been so torn up about Leaft you haven't looked at what the Jedi found on Wayland. It's bad, and we have to stop it. We might not be able to as it is, but if we spend another hour looking for Leaft, that's an hour less we have to do what we can. You want Leaft's death to have meaning? Then quit moping and get us moving."

"To where?"

"Thyferra. They've found a way to destroy bacta -- and worse."

Uldir stiffened. "Right," he said, wearily. "Let's go. But when this is over--"

"Save that for when it is over, Boss," Vega said.

"Sure." He glanced back at the stellar panorama, where their rotation was bringing the black hole back into view.

"I hope it hurt," he whispered.

"What?"

"He didn't like the thought of going out without feeling it."

She nodded. "That's Leaft."

He turned to go, and noticed that Vega's eyes were catching the light from the control panel. They glistened.

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Relieved to be back aboard the *No Luck Required*, Uldir found Bey and Klin-Fa hunched over something that looked like a sphere with short, stumpy tentacles. The tentacles writhed, slightly. On the surface of the sphere itself, odd symbols formed and dissipated.

Klin-Fa looked up. "Hi," she said, softly. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Uldir brusquely replied. "I've laid in a course for Thyferra. Now tell me why exactly."

"The slave ship?"

"Vook's flying it. He had the same problem Leaft must have had, but he figured out how to correct for it. When we finally raise someone, we'll have them taken off our hands. Now, what have you got there?"

Bey spoke up. "What the Yuuzhan Vong found on Wayland was a biochemical sequencing of bacta. At some point the Emperor must have been considering neutralizing it, but his scientists never got that far. The Yuuzhan Vong did." He pointed to the screen. "They've developed an agent, something like a virus. It attacks the alazhi plant bacta is made from."

"It kills it?"

"No, something much more subtle. The virus mimics the active chemicals and bacteria in alazhi and then goes quiescent. Absolutely undetectable, unless you know exactly what to look for. It stays there when it's brewed with kavam to produce bacta. But when the bacta is introduced into a living subject, it activates at a low level. It's a sort of time bomb. A few weeks after bacta treatment, the subject drops dead in a few hours. They've tested it on a wide sampling of species already. There's no cure, and no reversing the process. Once infected, the alazhi plants will pass the virus on genetically. You see what this means?"

Uldir nodded. "Everyone uses bacta. We've been using it so long, it's replaced most conventional medicine."

"Exactly. If they had gotten away with this without anyone knowing, imagine the number of injured who would have been infected."

"Millions, maybe, if there's a new Yuuzhan Vong offensive," Uldir said.

"Which the evidence points to," Vega added.

"Yeah, this isn't good," Uldir allowed. "How is this virus being delivered?"

"That's a little fuzzy," Klin-Fa admitted. "But from what we've got here, my best guess would be an operative. The virus spreads very quickly. If it was introduced to one of the major alazhi plantations, it would infect the whole planet in days."

"They might have already done it," Vega observed.

"They might have," Klin-Fa conceded, "but I don't think so. There's a timetable here. It looks like we have about forty hours."

"We can make Thyferra in thirty," Uldir said. "But then we still have to find the agent carrying the virus. Considering the Yuuzhan Vong ability to disguise themselves -- it sounds impossible."

"We start with the largest, most centrally located plantations," Bey said. "The only good thing about not being able to sense the Yuuzhan Vong in the Force is that it makes it easier to pick them out when they're disguised. It's like they're not there."

"It's worth a try," Uldir said. "Meanwhile, we get the word out. If we fail, at least they'll know not to use bacta from now on."

"The loss of bacta is going to be a hard blow to recover from, especially in wartime," Vega observed.

"True," Uldir said. "So we don't let it happen. We stop them. Keep on the hyperwave and HoloNet. Let somebody know what's going on. We need help on this, and if something happens to us, this secret can't die with us."

"Will do, Boss," Vega replied.

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"Are you busy?"

Uldir turned from the controls and saw Klin-Fa standing in the entrance to the bridge. She was just brushing her dark bangs from her eyes, and something went odd in his chest.

"Where's your friend?" He asked.

"Sleeping. He's still not in very good shape."

"What happened to him?"

"He's not sure. Something that hurt a lot, that's all he remembers."

"Well, those are the Yuuzhan Vong we all know and love. 'Life is pain.' Sometimes I think they're right."

"Life is a lot of things," Klin-Fa said. "Pain is certainly one of them, but it's not the sum of it." Her voice lowered. "I'm sorry about the Dug."

"His name was Leafth," Uldir said, more harshly than he meant to. "And yeah, so am I."

"It wasn't for nothing."

"Thanks, but that doesn't really help."

"I know. I lost a friend, too." she paused. "There were three of us, originally. Bey, me, and Yabaley."

"I heard you say that name back on Bonadan. When you killed the Yuuzhan Vong warrior."

"Yes."

"You were angry."

"He was my friend. He..." Her gaze flicked off, as if seeking advice from someone in the corner. "He was more than a friend, really. The Yuuzhan Vong killed him not long after we were captured. They tortured him to death. I felt him die."

Uldir felt his cheeks grow warm with shame. "I'm sorry. I knew something . . ."

"I know what you think. Back on Wayland, you made it clear you thought I had gone over to the dark side."

Uldir nodded. He had studied at Master Skywalker's Jedi academy but had shown no real talent for the Force. Still, he sometimes had some sensitivity to the Force, and he had an odd sort of luck it was difficult to put down to mere chance.

"I sensed something dark on Wayland," he said. "And on Bonadan. I thought it was you."

"Wayland's seen a lot of the dark side. I felt shadows there too. Bonadan -- well, I think I came close, Uldir. I felt it -- the power of the dark side, the attraction of it. I wanted to kill them all. But I stepped away from it."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"You helped."

"I don't see how."

"You're a decent guy. You may not be strong in the Force, but there are more important things than that. You've got a lot of them. I was starting to go a little crazy. Everywhere I went, everyone I turned to ended up being stupid or corrupt or an enemy. You didn't. I -- ah -- I guess you renewed my faith, or something."

"I wish that had translated into trust a little earlier on," Uldir said.

"I'm trying to thank you."

"I know. I appreciate that. I just --" he pursed his lips angrily. "Why did you kiss me?"

Her eyes widened, and then she chuckled. "That sure came from a hidden vector." She folded her arms across her chest. "I kissed you because I wanted to."

"Because I'm a decent guy."

"Sure."

He stood up and took a step toward her. She seemed to hug herself harder. "And what if I kissed you?"

She looked away. "That's not such a good idea, right now. Bey--"

"Right," Uldir murmured, turning away.

"If you'll let me explain--"

"We're reverting to realspace," Uldir said. "It'll have to wait. And you don't owe me any explanations anyway."

She was starting to say something else when the stars came back--the stars and more.

"Sithspit!" Klin-Fa gasped.

Uldir didn't say anything -- he just punched the ion drive to maximum and put the ship into a spin to avoid the Yuuzhan Vong frigate he was about to smash into. He managed it, barely, but space was thick with ships, laser fire, and plasma trails.

"What's going on?" Vega came rushing in from the back.

"We dropped into the middle of a battle, looks like," Uldir grunted, unnecessarily.

"Where are we?"

"The Yag'Dhul system," he replied, as the ship shuddered under the impact of a plasma projectile. "I was staging our last jump from here. Looks like the ceasefire has been broken. We're at war with the Vong again."

"I'd say so," Vega said, dryly. She shot Klin-Fa a nasty look. "Move over, sweetness. I need the copilot's seat."

Klin-Fa moved silently away.

"Work out the last jump, before we get fried," Uldir said.

"I'm working," Vega said. "Yag'Dhul is a complex system. All those moons. At least we don't have the transport to worry about any more."

"True." They'd left the transport and the refugees on it in what Uldir hoped was neutral space, fearing they might run into a situation like this.

Well, not like *this*. What he'd feared was an interdicator or something, not a whole vaping fleet.

Uldir opened up with the forward guns and keyed on the intercom. "Leaft--" then he stopped cold.

"It's okay boss," Vega said, without looking up. "I was wondering why he wasn't in the turret too."

But then the turret did begin firing. Not with Leaft's dead-sure accuracy, but a coralskipper exploded in incandescence. "Who's down there?" Uldir asked.

"That would be me," Klin-Fa's voice came back.

"Good going. Keep it up. Uvee, how are things?"

Systems deteriorating, the astromech droid's translator screen read.

"Well, what else is new?" Uldir muttered, just as a Yuuzhan Vong ship swung into view. Upwards of fifty coralskippers detached and started their way.

"Vega?"

"Almost there," she said, distractedly.

The skips fell into several wedges. Uldir began to wonder who the Yuuzhan Vong were fighting exactly -- at the moment he didn't see any ships that weren't enemies.

The skips approached firing range. "Got it, boss. Go."

He went.

* * *

Their next reversion was entirely uneventful. They appeared a few hundred thousand clicks from Thyferra -- right on the dot in galactic terms. "There's still no word from Skywalker or anyone else," Vega told him.

"Small wonder. There's a war going on."

Vega shook her head. "It's more than that. I did manage to get a news summary from the HoloNet. Master Skywalker was ordered arrested. He fled Coruscant and went into hiding."

Uldir whistled. "I knew Borsk Fey'lya was stupid, but that's really stupid. How does he think the New Republic can possibly win this war without the Jedi?"

"The Yuuzhan Vong promised that if all of the Jedi were delivered to them the war would end, remember?"

"Yeah, right. That's why they're taking Yag'Dhul even as we speak." A light blipped on the console. "The Thyferrans are asking what our business in their system is."

Uldir sighed. "Tell them. Give them our highest priority clearance code. If that doesn't work, we go in without them. There's no time to lose. The operative is probably already here."

* * *

An hour later they were planetside, in an old building that recalled Imperial architecture. The office they stood in had been opened to the air on two sides, furnished with potted plants and trailing vines and wickerwork furniture not designed for humanoid frames, but the harsh, industrial lines of the structure still peeked through.

"It's quite impossible," Xeshen Kra was saying, clicking the three fingers of one hand and touching Uldir's shoulder with another. His skin had changed from a light gray to mauve since Uldir's arrival, and while he remembered that signified a shift in emotion, he had no idea what particular emotion mauve signified.

"Our intelligence was stolen directly from the Yuuzhan Vong," Klin-Fa pointed out. "They plan to destroy bacta -- all of it -- and they will if you don't take us seriously."

The Xeshen Kra didn't blink -- he couldn't, for there were no lids on his bulbous black eyes -- but Uldir got that impression, nevertheless.

"And yet how could this scheme be carried out?" Kra asked, mildly. "We screen off-worlders carefully, and I do not think a Yuuzhan Vong could masquerade as one of us, no matter how clever the disguise."

"True," Uldir agreed. Their host was a Vratix. His body was hook-shaped, his insect-like head set on a long slender neck on the long end of the hook. He looked down at Uldir from a height of nearly two meters. His two back limbs were enormously muscular and bent the wrong way -- twice. The spiked forelimbs were also twice jointed. "But Yuuzhan Vong biotechnology--"

"*Might* be able to produce our form, though that is highly doubtful. But we also communicate by scent and touch, and by the mind-to-mind. Could all of this be convincingly duplicated? We would know. Our bacta production is not without security precautions. Saboteurs have come here before."

"They might be using a Vratix," Vega pointed out. "They could have captured one of your people and brainwashed him."

"Even less likely that we would not notice such a thing. His intent would be known by the mind-to-mind."

"But you do have humanoid employees, don't you?" Uldir persisted.

"Not many. Since we expelled the off-world cartels many years ago, we have employed mostly our own people."

"That might actually make it easier," Bey put in. "You're right, the Yuuzhan Vong agent is almost certainly disguised as a humanoid. If there aren't many humanoids working in Bacta production, it makes our job of checking them much simpler."

The Vratix considered that for a moment, continuing to paw Uldir's arm. "Very well," he said at last. "I still doubt this threat, but it will do little harm to do as you propose."

"Good," Uldir said. "Where should we start?"

Xeshen Kra turned to her assistant, who had a portable database. "We should check the most recent arrivals first," Vega said. "Anyone who was just hired or has recently returned from off-planet."

The assistant consulted the pad for a moment, then looked up. "The alazhi fields at Vrelnid are nearby. They are vast, and there are a number of humanoid technicians there. Two have begun work there in the past week." He released Uldir's arm. "We can take my flier," he added.

During the flight, Uldir distractedly watched the alternation of jungle and field.

Vega moved near. "What's wrong?" She asked.

"I don't know. Something seems wrong about this."

"Such as?"

"If our hypothetical saboteur is already here, his work is already done -- the bacta is infected."

"Right, but maybe not all of it. They can burn the infected fields."

"True. It's just..." He shrugged. "Just a feeling."

The fields at Vrelnid were indeed vast, though Uldir wouldn't have really called them fields, just a lower sort of jungle, rambling off from the base of a small mountain range. The processing plant was modest, a few buildings outside of a ring-walled Vratix village. He saw that the humanoid workers were already assembled near the landing pad.

"This bio-weapon," Xeshen Kra asked, as they circled in. "Do you know the mode of delivery?"

"Not the primary mode, no," Klin-Fa said. "It might be in some sort of aerosol container. Once introduced, the plants themselves begin producing it in the form of spores. The spores are not only airborne but also self-motivated. They'll seek out the chemical signature of alazhi plants."

"It would spread very quickly, then?" The Vratix asked.

"Very," Bey said. "That's why we need to catch the agent before he can begin the introduction."

The flier touched down and its landing ramp extended. The four humans and two Vratix descended to the packed brown earth. Three humans, a Twi'lek, and a Neimoidian watched them approach with puzzled expressions.

"What's this all about?" One of the humans -- a small woman with blond hair asked.

"Yes," the Neimoidian said. "Why is our time being wasted?"

"And why the security troops?" A second human -- a sandy-haired man -- said. "We aren't criminals."

"We apologize for the inconvenience," Uldir said, "but it's necessary. And it won't take long. Klin-Fa? Bey?"

The two Jedi nodded and stepped forward.

"Really," the Neimoidian said. "Aren't we even due an explanation?"

Xeshen Kra waved his hands. "These Jedi believe there is a threat to the bacta. All will be explained in time."

"He's not there," Klin-Fa said, pointing at the man who had just spoken. Before the words left her mouth, the fellow was already in motion, leaping straight for Uldir's throat, shouting something in the all-too recognizable Yuuzhan Vong language.

He was fast. Vega was faster. Her blaster rifle came up and whined. Uldir's attacker snarled and staggered as a bolt struck him in the sternum, but he did not stop. Uldir raised his hands to defend himself and tried to step back, but he bumped into Xeshen Kra. A fist slammed into his guard and through it, catching him hard on the side of the jaw. Then the hands were on his head, and he felt his neck twist. He vaguely heard the snap-hiss of

a lightsaber, and was suddenly free as the hands -- and the arms they were attached to -- fell away. Klin-Fa stood there, her yellow lightsaber held at guard. The man -- Yuuzhan Vong, rather -- fell to his knees, gaping at the stumps of his arms.

"Infidels," he snarled. "You are too late. The hinges of this fortress are already weak. Our fleet sweeps through it like flame."

"Fleet?" Uldir said. "The fleet we saw back at Yag'Dhul? It's staging for an attack on Thyferra?" He frowned at Klin-Fa. "Then why would they send someone to poison the bacta?"

"The bacta plague is a Shaper initiative," Klin-Fa said. "Maybe they didn't know about the military invasion -- the warriors would plan that. Or maybe it's a back up, in case the fleet is defeated at Yag'Dhul."

The kneeling Yuuzhan Vong collapsed, finally overcome by shock.

"Wait," Uldir said. "That means this guy isn't--"

"Where did Bey go?" Vega asked.

"What?" Uldir swung his head around, looking.

"Oh, no," Klin-Fa said. "Oh, no."

"Vaping Moffs," Uldir said. "It's Bey, isn't it? He's the agent."

"I -- the Vong must have done something to him."

"You *suspected* this?" Vega snarled.

"No -- I mean, I knew there was something wrong with him. He kept closed to me. But sometimes I felt--"

"Something dark," Uldir finished. "It was him, not you."

She dosed her eyes. "It must be true."

"Question?" Vega asked. "Why are we still discussing this?"

"You're right. We have to find him, and fast."

"The fields," Klin-Fa said. "He can't have gone far."

"Split up," Uldir commanded.

Klin-Fa had already started off at a dead run. Uldir chose another direction, but Vega tugged at his sleeve. "You still trust her?" she asked. "What if she's just going to help him?"

"Then we're in very deep trouble," Uldir replied. "Now go. And be careful. If he is what I think he is--"

"Yeah." Vega started off, too.

* * *

Leafth woke in a foul mood. His head hurt, his nose itched -- and, oh, yes -- his limbs were glued to a wall with some kind of goo. Bloorash jelly, he figured, because that's what the Yuuzhan Vong used to hold captives, and he was clearly still on the Yuuzhan Vong ship. What had happened to the Boss and the others? Had they been captured? Had they left him here? He yanked at the jelly until his limbs started to spasm, and then tried to quiet himself. It wasn't easy, but he had to think.

He'd been in a coralskipper. He'd been falling into a black hole, and then something had grabbed the 'skip, a counter-force pulling it back -- then nothing.

But he didn't think this was the slave transport either. It was another ship; maybe the one Vook had been fighting.

"Where are you cowards?" He shouted at the top of his lungs. "Where are you, you brave Yuuzhan Vong? I've killed a thousand of your kind and never seen one's face yet--" he took wind for more air, "-- *because you're always running the other way!*"

Then he jerked at the jelly some more.

A few moments later, someone came into the room. He was Yuuzhan Vong, of course. A black web tattoo covered his face, centered on the two holes that passed for a nose. His ears had been sliced into three lobes, and he had three holes in each cheek. He was rangy, almost wiry for a Yuuzhan Vong, and tall.

"Pray," he said, in Basic.

"I'm not religious," Leafth informed him. "But you ought to take your own advice and ask your mangy, mother-beating coward-gods to have pity on you, because once I'm free of this stuff--"

The Yuuzhan Vong smiled and raised some sort of staff. It spat at Leafth's wrist and ankles, and the stuff holding him suddenly dissolved. With a yowl, Leafth leapt at the Yuuzhan Vong, swinging up for a powerful kick.

But when his hand-feet got there, the enemy wasn't. He'd moved aside, blindingly fast. Or, no, he wasn't there at all. Leafth turned this way and that, snarling.

Then the wall punched him in the head so hard that for an instant he thought that his eyes had been pushed together. He stumbled, and the Yuuzhan Vong was there again, swinging, hitting him in his dorsal diaphragm so he suddenly had hard vacuum in his lungs. A final kick sent him into the wall, where all sorts of things seemed to snap.

Wheezing, Leafth tried feebly to rise.

"*Prey*, not pray, infidel," the Yuuzhan Vong said. "You are my prey, nothing more. I honored you by giving you the opportunity to attack me. It was clearly more honor than you deserved."

Leafth tried to retort, but he was still failing to breathe.

"I am Tsaa Qalu, a hunter," the Yuuzhan Vong went on. "Do you understand? I have tracked you from Wayland. I am still tracking the rest of your pack."

"Why?" Leafth managed to cough out.

"Get up. I will show you."

"I can't. You've broken one of my arms."

"Ah. Is that so?" He took a step closer and pointed. "This one?"

"Yes."

He kicked it, hard. Leafth screamed what he thought was a suitably loud scream. It wasn't that difficult, since it really was broken.

"Embrace the pain, infidel, for you will never draw breath again without it."

"Eat my neck dung," Leafth suggested.

"Come." The Yuuzhan Vong grasped him by his good arm and yanked him up as if he were made of pfith-thistle. He dragged him from the cell and into a corridor, hustled him past a couple of coralskipper docks, through a dilating membrane and into another hall. They passed one more door and entered what Leafth recognized as a bridge. Another Yuuzhan Vong sat with a cognition hood on his head.

Through a transparency, Leafth could see the curve of a large green-and-blue planet.

"Your nestmates are down there," Tsaa Qalu said. "They have with them one who has seen the wisdom and rightness of our ways."

"A traitor? The girl?"

The Yuuzhan Vong dismissed the question with the back of his hand against Leafth's face. It stung, but next to his other pains, it was nothing.

"I am speaking, infidel. He has embraced the Truth. The Shapers sent him here to do a thing, a thing that will hasten our victory. I do not know what. I do not care." He snarled and clutched his hands behind his back. "The Shapers did not bother to inform me of this thing. Two of you invaded our territory on Wayland. I followed,

sensing a good hunt. Only when I had your ship in my claws did the Shapers tell me their plan, knowing that I would spoil it by killing you all." He grimaced. "Shapers. They know nothing of honor. They should have given this task to me to carry out, but they prefer to work in secret, to keep things from the other castes and even other Shaper sects so they do not have to share the spoils of battle. Many are heretics, as well." He shrugged. "But no matter, the hunt was begun. I merely altered the time of the kill. I had to stop you from plunging the slave-ship into the singularity so that the Shaper agent would not die."

"What are you talking about?" Leafth muttered. "I saved the transport." His arm was really hurting now. He was starting to worry he might black out.

"A near miracle," Tsaa Qalu said. "I gave you the knowledge. The Shaper's agent has a small villip implanted in his skull. Through it, I told him what to do. And yet still you almost failed."

The planet below was growing larger. "So what now?" Leafth asked, wearily.

"The agent's task is complete," Tsaa Qalu said. "But he has been discovered. So, I will now kill everyone who has learned of the Shaper plan. According to the agent, most such are all in one place. It should not be difficult to track those who remain. We will be there in a few moments." "Hah. You and this guy are going to beat the boss? Think again."

"I won't fight them hand-to-hand, though that would be glorious. No, I must be efficient and certain. I have weapons that can easily neutralize any sentient in the area. It will be no trouble at all."

"You forgot one thing," Leafth said.

"What's that?"

"You have to kill *me* first."

And ignoring the pain, Leafth gathered his three functioning limbs and sprang.

* * *

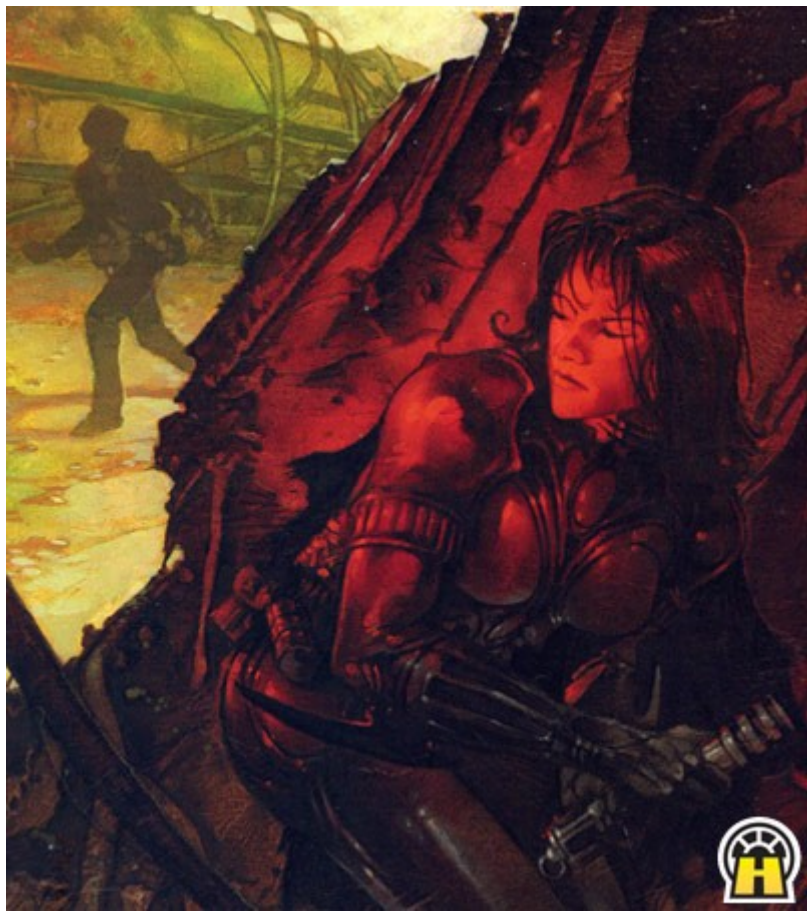
Uldir felt something in the Force. A shadow, but a familiar one. He was certain it was the same dark presence he had sensed several times before. He imagined if he had real Jedi potential it wouldn't be so intangible but like a giant laser display pointing the way. As it was, it gave him only the vaguest sense of direction. Bey could be a meter away, hidden in the undergrowth, or half a kilometer away.

Was it Bey he sensed? The Jedi hadn't been on Bonadan, had he? Well, maybe he had. How long ago had the Yuuzhan Vong broken him? But the only Jedi he knew for sure had been on Bonadan was Klin-Fa. What if Vega was right? What if they had both gone dark? It made a certain amount of sense -- if the Yuuzhan Vong could break one of them, they could break both.

He heard something up ahead and moved even more cautiously. The sound was gone, now, though. So was his sense of a dark presence.

Then he heard the hum of a lightsaber igniting, only a few footsteps away. He whirled and saw Klin-Fa, her face set in grim lines. Her blade cut toward him. With a yelp he dropped and rolled. She flew past, her blade shearing through undergrowth. He came up on one knee, brought his blaster to bear--

-- and saw her real target as her amber blade met Bey's crimson one in a shear of sparks. Bey must have been hidden less than an arm's length from Uldir.



He pulled out his comlink with one hand and tried to draw a bead with his blaster with the other.

"Vega, I found him. Hurry!"

Klin-Fa was a whirlwind. Bits of alazhi plants flew everywhere, and her blade was an arcing blur. Bey seemed unconcerned, parrying easily and returning blows that missed Klin-Fa by quantum increments. He was clear for a moment, and Uldir snapped off a shot. The Jedi parried it without even glancing his way, sending the bolt burning off through the underbrush.

"It's too late," Bey informed them. "It's already done. The spores were in me. They were released from my pores. It's all around you, now."

Klin-Fa drew back to a guard position. Uldir could see tears streaming down her face.

"What did they do to you, Bey? How did they turn you into -- this?"

The redheaded Jedi laughed. "You think the Yuuzhan Vong did this to me?"

"You were their captive for--"

He grinned. "I was never their captive. You were."

"What do you mean? We escaped, and then--"

"All part of the plan," he said. "Everything that's happened up until now, all planned."

"I don't understand."

"Well, I didn't understand you and Yabaley. What did you see in him? I was always stronger, smarter. He didn't deserve you."

"I loved him."

"And not me. And in my whole life, that's all I ever really wanted. And I'll never have it, will I? So I'll settle. I'll settle for helping the Yuuzhan Vong burn this all down, and then maybe I'll kill them too. Or maybe I'll rule them."

"Wow," Uldir said. "You have the most amazing mental image of yourself. Too bad it has nothing to do with reality."

"You're an insect," Bey sighed. He flipped his hand casually, and a searing pain struck Uldir between the eyes.

"No!" he heard Klin-Fa shout. She leapt at Bey, blade cutting down. Through a fog of pain, Uldir saw Bey parry, and then somehow Klin-Fa's weapon was flipping end-over end through the air. She gasped in pain and clutched at her right hand, which seemed to be missing several fingers. Bey had his weapon cocked for the final cut. Klin-Fa drew her shoulders back and looked him in the eye.

"I admired you once, Bey," she said. "I thought you were the best of us."

"I *am* the best of you," he sneered. "Goodbye, Klin-Fa."

Uldir clutched for his blaster, but it wasn't near his hand.

The blade whipped out, and Uldir choked back a scream of frustration, but the red blade went up in a parry, not an attack, and several blaster bolts went searing off at odd angles.

Vega.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Klin-Fa spun to kick Bey. She connected, and he staggered, turned, and clubbed her in the temple with the butt of his saber. She dropped. Uldir grunted, stood, looking for the blaster, but it was nowhere to be seen.

But a few meters away, smoke was rising. Klin-Fa's lightsaber. He ran toward it.

He picked it up and turned in time to see Vega go down in a rain of stones and branches propelled by the Force. The bushes were on fire, and he got a lungful of smoke that dizzied him, but he saw that Bey was once more lifting his weapon over the fallen Klin-Fa.

He would never make it in time. He did the only thing he could--he threw the lightsaber.

He watched as if flipped end-over-end toward Bey. Bey held up his hand, and it made a sudden drastic course change, veering high and to the right. Bey started his swing.

"No!" Uldir shouted.

The lightsaber hit a tree by the pommel, bounced weirdly, and sheered through Bey from shoulder to hip. He turned to stare at Uldir in utter disbelief for an instant before his body slid apart.

Uldir stood there for twenty seconds, trying to absorb what had just happened. Then he ran to see how badly Klin-Fa and Vega were hurt. Overhead he heard thunder, and looked up. It was a Yuuzhan Vong war vessel, descending like a meteor.

* * *

Leaft would have howled with satisfaction if he hadn't been howling in pain. Tsaa Qalu braced to meet his attack, almost casually, knowing what the outcome would be. But Leaft knew that too. Everyone thought Dugs were stupid, headstrong, emotional -- that they couldn't learn.

But he'd learned pretty fast. His leap carried him not toward the Yuuzhan Vong hunter, but to the pilot, and with a single brutal yank he ripped the cognition hood free of its tether and then just ran, back through the door he had come in by. Tsaa Qalu was right behind him, of course, and gaining, when the ship suddenly flipped upside down. The Yuuzhan Vong, with his grotesquely high center of gravity and silly upper limbs landed badly. Leaft, even with a limb broken, still managed to land better. Of course it hurt, and he nearly blacked out again, but he was up before Qalu, and as the ship continued bucking and jerking about, Leaft's low-built scramble gained him even more ground.

Enough to get into one of the coralskippers, seal it with an order through the cognition hood, and watch Tsaa Qalu pound on the hull in terrific and entertaining frustration.

Which he should not have done. If Tsaa Qalu had spent that time getting into the other coralskipper, he doubtless would have been better able to seize control of a system which -- after all -- was built for his chemistry and physiology, not a Dug's.

But before Qalu could think of that, Leaft's borrowed coralskipper shot from the docking nacelle with a jolt. This time he'd launched the 'skip on purpose.

The Dug wasted little time taking control of the *Throat Slasher* while steering his craft away from the larger ship. A mental image of the fast-approaching landscape from the *Throat Slasher's* point of view coalesced in his mind's eye, and the Dug allowed himself a victorious smirk. He watched from his vantage point a few hundred meters away as Qalu's ship left a nice red smear on the side of a mountain.

* * *

"It's good to hear your voice, Master Skywalker," Uldir said. "Congratulations on the birth of your son."

"Thank you, Uldir," Master Skywalker replied. "How are things there?"

"The Vratix can move really fast when they need to. They torched the field and aerosoled the surrounding area with fliers. They're still doing it, even though worst-case scenario had the virus spreading only half a kilometer during that time. They got a sample of the plague so they can test for it, and it looks like the danger was contained."

"Good. That was good work, Uldir. I'm proud of you and your team. You really went above and beyond the call of duty. And the Force was with you."

"Master, about the Force. I know my training was sort of a bust--"

"The Force is with you, Uldir," Skywalker said. "You just have a peculiar relationship with it. I missed that, back when you were at the academy, though I think Master Ikrit understood. Recent ... *debates* within the Jedi, and the things you've told me lately have forced me to reevaluate."

"I don't understand."

"You don't command the Force, no. You don't use it as a tool. You aren't built that way, somehow. But you are a part of the living Force in a way which few Jedi ever manage to be."

"I don't think there's anything so special about me," Uldir said.

"You thought so when I first met you," Skywalker said. "You thought the universe of yourself, and mostly *about* yourself. But you changed." He smiled. "And that's when your luck started, isn't it? When you let go. When you released your desires and found your true path."

"I guess. Master Ikrit did say something like that, right before I left the academy."

"He was wise," Skywalker said. "Take that crew of yours and have rest, will you? There are still a few free worlds where you can relax."

"I'll do that," Uldir replied.

"May the Force be with you, Uldir."

"And with you, Master."

He keyed off the hyperwave transmitter and went back to the common room, where the others waited. He grinned when he saw Leafthorn with a big air splint on his arm. The Dug's eyes narrowed. "You aren't going to kiss me again, are you?"

"I ought to. Not only are you still alive, but you saved us all."

"I'll vomit this time," Leafthorn warned. "Do I need to tell you what I just ate?"

"No." He turned to Vega. "Set us a course for someplace relaxing. Master Skywalker's orders."

"Right, boss-boy."

Vook cleared his throat. "The abandoned Hxil launch platform in the Sluis Van system would be nice. It has the most beautiful preRepublic accelerator towers--"

"An airless piece of space junk?" Leafthorn snarled. "What kind of a vacation is that? I say we hit the casinos in Cloud City. That's a good time."

"Boss-boy?" Vega asked.

"You settle it, Vega," he said. "You're temporarily in charge."

"Boss--"

"Sorry Vega. I need a rest, too."

He found Klin-Fa sitting in the gun turret, staring out into space. Her bandaged hand rested on her knee.

"It wasn't your fault," he said.

"It was, it wasn't," she said. "I know I have to let it go. But they were my friends. Both of them. And now--"

"I know." He put his hand on her arm. To his surprise, she took it.

"What I was trying to tell you before," she said. "Before I knew Bey had turned dark."

"I know you had feelings for him," Uldir said.

"Yes. Friendly ones. But I knew my feelings for Yabaley had hurt him. I didn't know how badly, but I knew it. I didn't want to hurt him again so soon."

"What do you mean?"

She stood and stared into his eyes. "Are you really that big a fool, Uldir Locket?"

"Well . . ."

"Hush." She covered his mouth with her hand, and then with her lips. They stayed that way for a long time.

The End